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ABSTRACT

Similarities among different languages that are met with by means of empirical, confrontative analysis should not be mistaken for universals in the logical or philosophical sense. What Verma has described as the "propositional constituents" of a sentence (participants, process, and a temporal relation) may be considered logically universal. On the other hand, most "surface-structure" generalizations about language similarities do not refer to universalities. These non-universals include, among other categories, phonological changes that are explicable in terms of anatomical characteristics of human speech production, "taboo" lexical items, the notion of estimate from a distance that underlies the comparative degree, the construction of progressive verbal action by means of common lexemes, and the general use of nouns from the semantic field of diminutiveness in the function of negative intensifiers. (Author/JB)

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THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS IN NATURAL LANGUAGES

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Taking into consideration what has so far been achieved in the history of contrastive analysis since its beginnings in the Prague and American schools of linguistics in the early thirties, its merits may be seen from three main angles of theoretical and applied linguistics, viz., language science (linguistics in general), language mediation (translation), and language teaching (methodology). It may be stated, in this connection, that the earlier term "confrontative analysis" as it was used by the scholars of the Cercle Linguistique de Prague seems to be more appropriate, because the results of any confrontation of two or more languages, both related and unrelated, are not only the contrastive phenomena or so-called "differentials" from phonological, lexicosemantic, and grammatical levels, but also certain common features that sometimes have been misinterpreted in terms of "universals."

However, applying the notion of "universal" to common or parallel phenomena of natural languages, as has been done in the fifties and sixties sometimes even by unduly referring to universalistic aspects of Chomsky's "deep structure," appears to be gravely misleading, because its semantic ambiguity is of a decisive relevance for linguistic theory. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary the word "universal" is used either as an adjective or as a noun. Its adjectival meaning is "of or belonging to or done, etc., by all persons or things in the world or in the class concerned, applicable to all cases, as...*the rule does not pretend to be universal,*" whereas used as a noun it means "(Log.) universal proposition; (philos.) general notion or idea, thing that by its nature may be predicted of many." Similarly, besides 8 meanings as an adjective, the same substantival abstract notions are mentioned s.v. "universal" in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, College Edition (RHDC), viz.

"9. Logic. a universal proposition" and

"10. Philos. a. a general term or concept or the generic nature that such a term signifies; a Platonic idea or Aristotelian form.

b. a metaphysical entity that remains unchanged in character in a series of changes or changing relations."

From these lexicological data may be inferred that by and large three different denotations of "universal" occurring in anthropological and linguistic writings have to be taken into account :

1. As in common usage = "general, common" (German "universell"). Thus, e.g., it may be said that the formal coincidence of accusative and nominative cases of neuter gender is a universal feature in this sense among Indo-European languages.

2. As used in mathematics and logic = "without exception" (German "ausnahmslos"). For example, it is held as "universal" in this sense that there is no language for which the phonological rule

$$z \rightarrow s \; / \; V - V$$

(voiced "s" becomes unvoiced between vowels)

holds true, whereas it may be assumed as a common feature or "universal" in the first sense that the inverse of the rule

$$s \rightarrow z \; / \; V - V$$

is to be met with in a great deal of natural languages.

Or, to give another example, if in the phonematic system of a given language there is a set of aspirated explosive consonants /p^h/, /t^h/, /k^h/, it may be taken for granted in the second sense of "universal" that there also exists an opposite set of the respective unaspirated explosives, but not vice versa.

3. As used in epistemology, psychology, and in information sciences = "a priori" or "existing in the mind prior to and independent of experience ; as a faculty or character of trait" (RHDC s.v. "a priori"); "innate (idea)" ; being the necessary precondition of experience" ; "entelechial" or "being a vital agent or force directing growth and life" (in vitalist philosophy ; cp. RHDC s.v. "entelechy") ; "pre-information" (in biology and information sciences).

Thus, taking 2. and 3. together, one is reminded somehow or other of the traditional dichotomy of "a posteriori" facts and "a priori" factors within the cognitive framework of man that has been described in different schools of philosophy since time immemorial. Incidentally, there is a striking resemblance of this logical and epistemological dualism, in which both empirical and non-empirical universals play an essential part, in the history

of linguistics from the "thesei/physei"-dichotomy in Plato's dialogue "Kratylos" through the famous "Universalienstreit" in the scholastic philosophy of the middle ages up to the "langue/parole"-, "genotype/phenotype"-, "deep structure/surface structure"—dichotomies of Ferdinand de Saussure, S.K. Šaumjan, and Noam Chomsky respectively. In the dispute raised by medieval scholastic philosphers concerning the essence and validity of "universals" (in the sense of general notions) the main issue was whether unversals should have to be attributed to objective reality (cp. Plato's "physei"), as it was postulated by the adherents of philosophical realism or apriorism ("universalia sunt realia ante rem"), or whether they are nothing else but "names" agreed upon by convention and attributed to things and facts (cp. Plato's "thesei"), as the followers of philosophical nominalism had it ("universalia sunt nomina post rem"). With all these notional and terminological ambiguities in view, the question may be raised, whether it is adequate in linguistics to continue applying the terms "differentials" and "universals" for different and common features on various levels of natural languages, or whether it would be more reasonable to replace them by "differences" or "dissimilarities" and "similarities" or "affinities", in order to avoid hypostatization of deep structure concepts on surface structure level. Moreover, it has to be considered whether an empirically gained universalistic notion, such as "elementary thought", adopted from anthropology, will be more suitable for an explanation of generally human principles underlying certain parallelisms among different natural languages instead of the philosophically disputable notion of "universals."

For the science and art of translation it has become more usual to speak of equivalences rather than of universals between source and target languages, because both the theoretician of translation and the translator himself find themselves confronted not with Language as such, but with a variety of natural languages, their peculiarities in terms of linguistic structure and pragmatic functioning. The same holds true for the teacher of foreign languages, who in designing his text-books and grammars as well as in classroom teaching has to take into account the linguistic and pragmatic differences and similarities between mother-tongue or base language (L_1), which is not the same in every case, and the foreign language that is to be acquired (L_2). Thus "differentials" and "universals", or more precisely and practically speaking, differences and equivalences among natural languages as a systematically displayed output of confrontative analysis are to be made use of in translation procedures and the methodology of teaching. That is why a series of M.A., M. Litt.. and Ph.D. dissertations written at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, India, are

concerned with structural confrontations of English, Russian, German, etc., with Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages (cp. e.g., Thakar 1977, Deo 1977, Bhat 1976 and many others). Yamuna Kachru (1976 : 1-2) rightly emphasizes the fact that confrontative analysis plays a predictive, explanatory and marginal role in language teaching, and accordingly it is taken for granted among linguists and philologists that theoretical and applied linguistics should never lose its contact with those practical fields in human development that may benefit from it as e.g., translation, language planning, and language teaching. In this connection it is to be doubted whether "If one is comparing the system of two languages to arrive at a conclusion about the linguistic universals, his study will be very different from another's who is interested in comparing two linguistic systems for the benefit of a pedagogist who is interested in using the findings of this study for producing teaching materials," as Patnaik (1976 : 24) has it. On the contrary, there has always been a fruitful and stimulating interrelation between linguistic research, including confrontative analysis, and language teaching, which incidentally is not only concerned with the errors due to an L_1 interference but also with the positive and productive "transfer" features, i.e., certain similarities or affinities between source and target language that should be utilized in teaching and translating. It may be useful to give an example here. When teaching German to Indian students with English as their common base language, it helps to resort to the English pronunciation of "bear" to arrive at an approximately correct pronunciation of "Berlin." On the other hand, the existence of a particular letter for a cerebral / ḍ / in Devanāgarī script is made use of in the Indian transliteration of English words like "road" in street names or in any other loan words from English like "ḍāktar" in Hindi. In experimental phonetics it may perhaps be proved by oscillography that the cerebralized cacuminal explosives of Indian languages are much nearer in sound quality to the alveolar / d / and /t/ of English than the respective dental explosives would be.

In this respect the concept of "base language" plays an essential role within the whole mechanism of foreign language learning and teaching. For German, Russian and French students, for instance, it will be much easier to grasp the structural peculiarities of Bahasa Indonesia, observing them through the morphosyntactic screen of their English proficiency rather than through the pattern of their own mother-tongue, because a confrontative linguostatistic analysis would reveal the fact that there are much less dissimilarities between the morphological and syntactic structures of English and Indonesian than will become evident in structural confrontations of the latter with any other European language, excepting Hungarian on account of its agglutinative properties in the morphological and lexicological

(word-formation) system. In this respect, again, we may see another point of contact between linguistics and language teaching, since the output of confrontative analysis in linguistic investigation will become the input to a transfer grammar or "differential grammar" (Chandrasekhar 1965), which helps to make teaching more effective in so far as it stresses the structural peculiarities of the foreign language, skipping those features which it may happen to have in common with the base language. A differential or—more precisely—transfer grammar concentrates on the differences between base language and target language. Speakers having an arsenal of several base languages at their disposal will have to choose the one with the lowest differential ratio as to the structural features of the target language that is to be acquired. This type of speaker is quite frequent in India. The relevance of the existence of both similarities and differences among the phonological, lexical, and grammatical systems of natural languages for general linguistics may be viewed from different angles. The aspect of mutual approximation and assimilation among different cultures and languages, the gradual development of affinities under linguistic adstratum and superstratum conditions, the process of pidginization and creolization that is to be observed whenever two or more languages come in contact or when they even penetrate each other to the extent of constituting a so-called "Sprachbund" (union of languages), all these are problems of a general linguistic interest, where structural differences and similarities are relevant. The question may be raised, whether the pidginization of different languages in contact as, e.g., of Melanesian, Polynesian and English in the case of the national language "Neo-Melanesian" of the newly independent state of Papua-New Guinea, has been stimulated or "catalysed" through the occurrence of structural "universals" which should have their counterparts in the spheres of social and cultural life. But this is, precisely, what is doubtful, because both anthropological and linguistic researches have shown that, e.g., kinship relations are usually judged from different points of view and given different names among different tribes and peoples of mankind. What may be considered "universal" at the utmost is the logical and biological relations such as "being parent or child of" for parental relation, "being spouse of" for marital relation, or "being the fruit of the same womb" for brotherly or sisterly relation as it had been described already by Pāṇini in referring to the etymology of "sodara" from "sa-udara" (cp. H. Spitzbardt 1970: 245 ff.). Similarly it is correct to say that the passive construction may not be considered as a language universal, because there are languages such as the Bahasa Indonesia where the use of the affected participant of a verbal action as "theme" in subject position is not in all cases equivalent to the so-called passive transformation in some of the European languages. Much in the

same way as everybody speaking a Slavonic language feels inclined to recognize verbal aspect whenever he is confronted with another language, most of the European grammarians in their Eurocentric predisposition zealously tried to press configurations and constructions of non-European languages onto the Procrustean bed of their linguistic system that had been designed uniformly and rigorously after the prescriptive pattern of Latin and Greek grammars.

Within this complex historical framework of philosophical interpretations and philological traditions, the genesis of the notion of language universals has to be understood. However, as it seems unrealistic, after discussing the terminological problem, to posit the existence of language universals at all, it has to be suggested that the term "universal" be divested of its philosophical, aprioristic meaning and be used rather in an empirical sense. Consequently, we agree with Verma (1968-69 : 36) "that there is no point in setting up an artificial intermediate structure : deep structure," because, as he has it (l.c. : 35) : "Sentence as an abstract linguistic unit has two aspects—'experience' and 'realization.' At the 'deep' conceptual or experiential level the processes are tenseless, the participants are bundles of relational features, and sequentiality is not a property of the constituents. Relations refer to underlying universal 'nexuses' which are realized in different forms in different languages—prepositions, postpositions, case endings, positioning, phonological case markers, passivization, negation, interrogation...are some of the common exponents of these relations." And it might, perhaps, be added that this is one reason for the difficulty or even impossibility of achieving, by and large, a biunique mapping of all elements contained in a sentence of a given source language on to the set of elements organizing a semantically and pragmatically equivalent sentence of the target language in the process of translation. It is true that "To the extent that no linguistic theory has yet been successful in characterizing a *universal base* for human languages, contrastive analysis cannot refer to this *base* to characterize equivalences between languages," as has been stated by Yamuna Kachru (1976 : 2) who goes on to say (l.c.), "more seriously, though, contrastive analysis so far has been unwilling to face the fact that one-to-one correspondence between languages is virtually impossible to come by. There are few, if any, *congruent* structures (Krzeszowki 1971) between languages. Yet, whatever can be said in one language can be said equally well in any other language. This means that the picture that emerges is one of asymmetric equivalence between languages, i.e., an utterance of language A may be equivalent to a number of utterances in language B or vice versa. Such equivalence relationships cannot be characterized in terms of *deep structure*

relationships of the kind that contrastive analysts have worked with, (e.g.. Chomsky 1965, Fillmore 1968)."

As has been shown in a critical study dealing with the logical and epistemological apriorism in some of Noam Chomsky's earlier publications (R. Spitzbardt 1974: 507-519), it is among other factors due to the influence of Lancelot's and Arnauld's "Grammaire générale de Port Royal" that some of his deep structure aspects should be looked upon and treated as "universals". However, postulating the assumption of a priori universals - more or less in the sense of "innate ideas"-that are involved in peculiar algorithms in generative transformational grammars, the formalizing and operational procedures of which have been derived from formal and mathematical logic, is one thing, and applying the same notion on surface structure to characterize certain parrallelisms in phonology, word usage and word formation, morphology, and syntax among different languages, is quite another. In any case the semantic and pragmatic aspects as well as the historical background in the growth of a linguistic structure should not be neglected, if language theory wants to be in agreement with the dynamic character of natural languages, with their "elastic stability", as the representative of the Prague School of Linguistics Vilém Mathesius once called it. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make the existence of lexicosemantic and structural equivalences among different languages plausible, if one hypostasizes a priori universals, or at least gives the impression of their hypostasizing by virtue of the terminological fault that has been referred to above. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to stress the importance of logical universals instead, which - and this is the main point of linguistic interest - do not of necessity have their counterparts in the form of language "universals" that are to be met with among natural languages. Regarding, vice versa, any casual resemblances, equivalences, or *affinities* (in the sense of empirical universals or common features) among natural languages, their correspondence to any logical universals, or emanation from a priori universals must not be posited for reasons of linguistic explanation. The idea of language affinities is nothing new in the history of linguistics. It has gained more importance and actuality since investigations on language typology have come into vogue after about 1950. The notion of "universal", has been introduced into linguistics primarily by anthropologists. The proceedings of one of the first conferences about these problems, held at New York, were published in a volume by Joseph Greenberg in 1963 under the title "Universals of Language." A discussion was afterwards initiated on an international scale, in which the critical views expressed by Soviet linguists (Barchudarov 1969, Kolšanskij 1972, Uspenskij 1965, and Vardul' 1969) are particularly

remarkable, posing the question of empirical versus logical universals and the relation between linguistic "universals" and language typology. Barchudarov (1969) endeavours to explain the term "universals" as occasional linguistic analogies, such as there are to be found among present day Indian languages. Distinguishing between diachronic and synchronic universals on the one hand and between universals as material language elements and those of a potential kind on the other, he contrives for the Indian languages taken as a whole the notion of "Sanskrit-Universals." The so-called "potential universals," by which term are to be understood, e.g., general trends in language growth and structure, may be inferred from deductions, whereas the so-called "real universals," corresponding to what may be regarded as language affinities or equivalences, are to be obtained by the inductive method of confrontative analysis. A similar point of view is expressed by many other scholars of the Soviet school of linguistics. Uspenskij (1965), e.g., in his typological language comparison differentiates the methodological problems from the empirical data. Kolšanskij (1972) suggests two different conceptions of universals: a narrower one, applicable to the study of various language types, and a broader conception based on functional aspects and pertaining to any given language irrespective of its structural type or—to use another applicable term coined by Vilém Mathesius—"characterology." Uspenskij, Greenberg and other linguistic empirists proceeded from anthropological reasonings, applying the notion of universals more or less in analogy to the "Elementargedanken" (elementary thoughts) of ethnology, which is used in opposition to the developmental concept of cultural parallels owing to migration, or of linguistic parallels called forth under conditions of "Sprachbund" or by other consequences of languages in contact (adstrat or superstrat influences, such as English "the other day" parallel to French "l'autre jour)." As has been revealed in several ethnological investigations, a great number of cultural parallels among different peoples all over the world—common features in birth, wedding, and death ceremonials, religious rituals, in mythology, in literature, etc.,—may be understood and explained as materializations of "Elementargedanken" inherent to the human species through its natural development. General phenomena of totemism and tabooing both in social relations and language (cp. H. Spitzbardt 1966: 105 ff.), recurrent motifs and themes in art and literature, sun worship, lingam cult, cosmic tree—all of these are common aspects in the cultural development of mankind. Accordingly, it is suggested for linguistics to discard resorting to philosophical universalism and its terminology in trying to explain the manifold affinities among natural languages, because an empirical generalization in terms of Elementargedanken, as common features of mankind rather than human mind, seems to be more plausible, at least to

those concerned with problems of language typology and confrontative analysis. In this respect a close inter-disciplinary collaboration between representatives of various branches of social sciences, above all between linguists, historians, ethnologists, sociologists, and psychologists is necessary in order to obtain linguistically valid results and tenable statements regarding the growth and structure of natural languages. It would not seem very far-fetched to interpret Elementargedanken in terms of "universals," however with one fundamental difference, viz., that an elementary thought is an empirically gained entity, a generally human feature, referring to what had been termed "faculté de langage" by Ferdinand de Saussure, with a direct relation to the actuality level of "parole" and, as a matter of course, through abstraction by means of the logical process of equivalency class formation, also to the level of "langue" within the sphere of potentiality or competence. It has to be noted that this is an empirical outlook on linguistic "competence" in relation to elementary thoughts which most probably had been the principal idea underlying Wilhelm von Humboldt's universalistic, humanistic view of the world. He speaks of the "Einerleiheit der menschlichen Natur und menschlichen Sprechwerkzeuge..." (oneness of human nature and human speech-organs: cp. also the Saussurean "faculté de langage)." In this connection, however, it must not be overlooked that, on the other hand, Wilhelm von Humboldt also emphasizes "die Verschiedenheit" (dissimilarity) which he assumes to be inherent in this human universality, saying: "Das Menschengeschlecht hat ungefähr überall dieselben Bedürfnisse und dieselben körperlichen und geistigen Kräfte, aber es bleibt doch in Mass und Beschaffenheit etwas Unbestimmbares übrig, worin sie sich voneinander unterscheiden, einander voreilen oder zurückbleiben..." (mankind has about everywhere the same needs and the same physical and mental energies, and yet there will always remain something that is indeterminable in quantity and quality, by which they will differ from each other, surpass or lag behind one another...). In accordance with this, Hans J. Vermeer in his book about the structure of Central-South-Asian languages (1969) does not only explain certain similarities in terms of individual borrowings from one language to another, or mere chance, or genetic relationship, and "Affinitäten im Sprachgefüge" (affinities in the linguistic structure), but also by means of "Allgemeinsprachliche und überhaupt allgemeinmenschliche Gegebenheit" (common linguistic and general human data). This is, in our opinion, a theoretical point of view, from which ignoring the historical and social principles in the growth and structure of natural languages and hypostasizing universalistic notions of an "a priori" character, may be avoided from the outset. Consequently it will be necessary and useful to re-examine the linguistic standpoint of the pioneer of language theory Wilhelm von Humboldt under the aspect of sociocultural

"Elementargedanken", the existence and effectiveness of which may easily be proved by pointing out to a significant quantity of examples from the social, cultural, and linguo-communicative behaviour among the peoples of the world. It will in all probability be seen then that the Humboldtian thesis of an "Umschaffen der Welt in das Eigentum des Geistes" (transcreation of the world into the property of human intelligence) by means of language has grossly been misinterpreted by representatives of neo-Kantian, neopositivistic, and neo-Humboldtian linguistic philosophy. As an example from modern language theory may be mentioned Leo Weisgerber's or H. Gipper's neo-Humboldtian notion of "innere Weltansicht" (inner view of the world), "geistige Zwischenwelt" (spiritual or intellectual intermediary world) acting as a sort of screen or filter that is said to have been brought forth by the peculiar characterology of one's native tongue, through which everybody is supposed to attain his knowledge of the world surrounding him. A similar kind of linguistic determinism had been expressed in the well-known hypothesis of Whorf and Sapir. Yet, "No one really knows how the human mind works", says Verma (1968-69 : 38), "We are trying to understand its working by trying to understand how human language works. Our predictions and generalizations are based on our insight into speech behaviour plus our knowledge of the general linguistic ability with which every normal human child is born."

Summarizing, it may be noted that any similarities or affinities that are to be met with among different languages by means of empirical, confrontative analysis should not be mistaken for universals in the logical or philosophical sense. It is universally true, though, that "All languages make a distinction between statements and questions, but languages tend to differ in 'surfacing' these distinctions" (Verma, l.c.). Thus, what Verma has convincingly described as the "propositional constituents" of a sentence, viz. *participants* (actor and affected), *process* (verbal action), and a *temporal relation*, for all three of which there are different ways of being semantically lexicalized and grammatically organized in any language, may be considered as logically universal. On the other hand, there is a great variety of "surface structure" phenomena among the majority, if not totality, of natural languages that are of a general, but non-universal character. In this respect may be mentioned, for instance, from the phonological field, the sound shiftings between /r/ and /l/, the mechanisms of assimilation and dissimilation, "hardening" of final mediae, palatalization processes and other common features of articulation and co-articulation, all of which are explicable in terms of speech-anatomical and physiological properties characteristic of the human species as a whole. Another generally human feature of a similar kind are

a number of lexical items, more or less under linguistic taboo, referring to things, facts, and functions that are fundamentally necessary for the biological, social and cultural survival of human beings. Anthropological facts and findings of this kind had to be taken into account, when Swadesh and Lees set out to collect lexical items that should be included in their 200 or 100 word lists serving as the common linguistic basis for their glottochronological comparisons with other languages (cp. H. Spitzbardt 1973 : 381 ff.). Any lexicostatistical analysis, however, would have to be considered irrelevant from the outset, if the basic items for the statistical correlations—though having been collected as common features from different languages initially—would be universals. Other linguistic similarities or affinities of a more or less common nature: e.g. the notion of estimate from a distance ("away from" as expressed by oblique cases or prepositions) underlying the comparative degree in English, Russian, German, Chinese, Arabic, Indonesian and other languages, the construction of progressive verbal action by means of the common lexemes "to be", "to sit", "to stand", "to be in the middle of" as in certain Indo-Aryan languages, in English, Spanish, Indonesian, etc., the general use of nouns from the semantic field "minuteness, smallness, worthlessness" in the function of negative intensifiers (English "a bit, a whit, a little, a fig, a damn, a hang...", German "die Bohne, einen Pfifferling, für einen Sechser...", French "ne...pas" = Indonesian "ti-dak"), the possibilities to express vocative and imperative, and many other common features from the lexical and grammatical fields are no more than chance resemblances that cannot be interpreted as "universals." Furthermore, it may be assumed that the common ideas behind all these linguistic affinities are anthropologically and linguistically explicable as Elementargedanken rather than universals in the logical or philosophical sense.

Other linguistic traits and trends of a general character, as e.g., the availability of linguistic means for both affirmation or negation and assertion or question in any language, the historical transition of peculiar lexemes from concrete (local) through temporal up to abstract (causal) meaning in the process of grammaticalization (cp. the etymologies of adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and other function words such as German "von dannen, dann, denn" or English "than, then"), the trivial fact of all language systems consisting of a lexicon and a grammar and their phonological systems of at least vowels and consonants, the general trend among natural languages of developing in a spiral course during their structural history: from a predominantly analytical-agglutinative characterology to a synthetical-inflectional one and from there again, progressively, to an agglutinative and mainly analytical type of structuring, and so forth, may be considered as universal

in the sense of "applicable to all cases," because they seem to be more or less referable to the general developmental characteristics of man and his communicative systems or to the general human ability (competence) of speech that had been distinguished from "langue" and "parole" as the "faculté de langage" by Ferdinand de Saussure more than fifty years ago.

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